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ABSTRACT

A widely held view of multicultural curricula sees them as strategies for improving academic performance and enhancing self-esteem among students whose racial, ethnic or language heritage differs from that of the Anglo-European population. There are others, however, who hold the view that culturally responsive curricula benefit all students. A culturally responsive curriculum capitalizes on students' cultural backgrounds rather than overriding or negating them. This Digest presents some characteristics of curriculum resources, outlines guidelines for assessing instructional materials for cultural bias or insensitivity, and provides a list of selected resources available to classroom teachers and other educators. A culturally relevant curriculum is described as one that: is integrated and interdisciplinary; does not rely on one-time activities, "add-on" units or "sprinkling" the traditional curriculum with a few minority individuals; is authentic, child-centered, and connected to the child's real life; develops critical thinking skills; often incorporates strategies that utilize cooperative learning and whole language instruction; includes self-esteem building; recognizes multiple intelligences and diverse learning styles; is supported by appropriate staff development and preservice preparation; and is part of a coordinated, school-wide strategy. (Contains 17 references.) (LL)

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ERIC DIGEST

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE CURRICULUM

by

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Culturally Responsive Curriculum

Ismat Abdal-Haqq

Introduction

Discourse about culturally responsive or culturally relevant curriculum (CRC) takes place within the context of debate about a larger issue, the validity and shape of a multicultural approach to public school education. A widely held view of multicultural or culturally pluralistic curricula sees them as strategies for improving academic performance and enhancing self-esteem among students whose racial, ethnic, or language heritage differs from that of the Anglo-European population (McCarthy, 1994; Association for the Advancement of Health Education, 1994). A corollary to this perspective is the belief that an inclusive curriculum can help promote intergroup harmony and reduce conflict between ethnic groups (Heller & Hawkins, 1994). In the minds of many educators, however, CRC benefits all students (*Series Looks*, 1993). Goal three of the original National Education Goals has as one of its objectives increasing the level of knowledge of all students about the country's diverse cultural heritage (Gronlund, 1993).

Critics frequently claim that multicultural education is essentially divisive and that school curricula should be organized around the nation's common culture (Ravitch, 1991-1992). Proponents argue that the goal of a pluralistic curriculum is to present the truth, which does not necessitate ignoring commonalities (Hilliard, 1991-1992). Some proponents suggest that the most common approaches to multicultural education do not go far enough if they focus on inclusion and do not incorporate a critical examination of the Anglo-European ideology that undergirds traditional public school education (McCarthy, 1994).

Curriculum that is culturally responsive capitalizes on students' cultural backgrounds rather than attempting to override or negate them. This Digest presents some characteristics of culturally responsive curriculum resources, outlines guidelines for assessing instructional materials for cultural bias or insensitivity, and provides a list of selected resources available to classroom teachers and other educators.

Characteristics of Effective Culturally Responsive Curricula

- CRC is integrated and interdisciplinary (Scherer, 1991-1992; Chisholm, Laquer, Hale, Sheorey, & McConville, Jr., 1991; Spears, Oliver, & Maes, 1990). It does not rely on one-time activities, "add-on" units or "sprinkling" the traditional curriculum with a few minority individuals (Hilliard, 1991-1992; *Series Looks*, 1993).
- CRC is authentic, child-centered, and connected to the child's real life. It employs materials from the child's culture and history to illustrate principles and concepts (Martinez & Ortiz de Montellano, 1988; Chisholm et al., 1991; Dickerson, 1993; Chion-Kenney, 1994).
- CRC develops critical thinking skills (*Series Looks*, 1993; Hilliard, 1991-1992).
- CRC often incorporates strategies that utilize cooperative learning and whole language instruction, include self-esteem building, and recognize multiple intelligences and diverse learning styles (Association for the Advancement, 1994; *Series Looks*, 1993).
- CRC is supported by appropriate staff development and preservice preparation (Coballes-Vega, 1992; Spears et al., 1990).
- CRC is a part of a coordinated, building-wide strategy. Successful implementation of CRC requires a receptive school climate and recognition that the hidden curriculum in any school can be a powerful ally or a powerful enemy (Dickerson, 1993; Sleeter, 1992).

Assessing Curriculum Materials for Cultural Relevance

Several checklists for evaluating instructional materials can be found in the literature on CRC. Gollnick and Chinn (1991) identify six forms of subtle and blatant bias that teachers should look for in textbooks and other instructional materials: invisibility, stereotyping, selectivity and imbalance, unreality, fragmentation and isolation, and language bias. The 10-item checklist provided by Chion-Kenney (1994), which covers many of the same points as the Gollnick and Chinn list, focuses on biases against Native Americans found in textbooks.

Typical inappropriate treatment of African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and Hispanic Americans includes the "side-bar" approach, the "superhero" syndrome, and the "one size fits all" view. Side-bar treatment occurs frequently in textbooks, where presentation of ethnic experiences is limited to a few isolated events, frequently relegated to a box or side-bar, set apart from the rest of the text. Another frequent misrepresentation of certain ethnic groups occurs when only exceptional individuals, the superheros of history from among that race or cultural group, are acknowledged. Instructional materials frequently reflect cultural bias through one size fits all generalization, by implying that there is a single Hispanic, African, Asian, and Native culture. This view fails to recognize that considerable cultural diversity exists within each of these groups and that even within a cultural subgroup, culture changes over time (Escamilla, 1993).

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Selected Resources

AskERIC is an Internet-based, question-answering service for K-12 teachers and other educators. An AskERIC staff member selects and delivers, within 48 hours, information from the ERIC system and from Internet resources that responds to the questioner. The AskERIC electronic library can be accessed directly on Internet and provides lesson plans, searches on current topics, full-text ERIC digests, resource guides, and reference tools. Contact: (800) 464-9107; askeric@ericir.syr.edu.

Interracial Books for Children Bulletin is published periodically by the Council on Interracial Books for Children. In addition to extensive reviews of children's books, this bulletin also includes articles and essays on multicultural issues. The council also publishes guidelines on evaluating books and other materials for racist content. Contact: The Council on Interracial Books for Children, 1841 Broadway, New York, NY 10023.

Multicultural Messenger, a newsletter published 10 times a year by the International Multicultural Education Association, contains news updates related to multicultural education, reviews of books and other instructional materials, and articles by educators on their experiences in culturally diverse schools. Contact: The Peoples Publishing Group, Box 70, Rochelle Park, NJ 07662; (201) 712-0090.

Teaching Tolerance is a semiannual periodical distributed free to teachers and other educators. The magazine's goal is to provide a vehicle for sharing ideas and resources for teaching tolerance and understanding among various groups. Contact: Teaching Tolerance, 400 Washington Avenue, Montgomery, AL 36104.

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